

THE PARENTING EDUCATION PROGRAM

RAISING PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN

We are fortunate to live in a time when knowledge and technology have improved our ability to be physically healthy. Things that are considered to be common knowledge today such as sanitation, health practices and nutrition have contributed to our overall physical health. For the most part, common illnesses like influenza, measles and mumps are seldom life threatening due to the availability of antibiotics, vaccines, and modern medical procedures. We also have increased knowledge and skills regarding psychological (mental) and emotional health. Psychological health includes the mental and behavioral characteristics of an individual. Emotional health deals with the feelings a person experiences and particularly how they feel about themselves and other people. The way people behave, and how they function is tied to their thoughts and feelings.

Parents are expected to take care of the physical health of their children. They do this by physically caring for them, teaching them about physical health, and making use of the resources available to them. It is just as important for parents to take care of the psychological (mental) and emotional health of their children. There are many things parents can do to raise mentally and emotionally healthy children. They can treat their children with love, respect and encouragement. Parents can teach children how to deal with their feelings and thoughts in a positive manner. One of the most important aspects of good psychological and emotional health is high self-esteem. Parents can provide an atmosphere where children can develop high self-esteem.

Basically, self-esteem is how people think and feel about themselves. Parents have very strong influence on the self-esteem of their children. Almost every interaction they have with their children can have either a positive or negative influence on the child's self-esteem.

Even simple daily activities can have a strong impact on children. Children's self-esteem is also influenced by the lack of interactions with their parents. Even a parent's absence or lack of active involvement with a child has an influence on them. Most commonly, children feel and believe that it is their own fault if their parents aren't there for them. Children assume that something is wrong with them or else their parents would be there for them. This damages the child's self-esteem.

It is very important for parents to emotionally be there for their children. Even when parents are physically absent, they can interact with their children by calling or writing to them. They need to be actively involved and participating with their children. Being actively involved means knowing what their children like, who their friends are, and/or what is important to them. To know all of these things about their child, the parent must LISTEN to them. Parents need to create an atmosphere where children are free to express themselves without having their thoughts and feelings invalidated or corrected.

Each person has a right to think their own thoughts and feel their own feelings. This includes children. They have a right to be separate individuals. Boundaries are essential for the survival of individuality and healthy self-esteem. Boundaries are like imaginary fences we place around ourselves that designate spaces. These fences allow us to separate ourselves from others and to know who we are. Without boundaries we become lost in other people and their thoughts and feelings. Boundaries, just like fences help us to identify what belongs to others and to ourselves. Boundaries also allow us to have a sense of privacy. Without knowing and separating our own thoughts and feelings from that of others, we cannot recognize our own needs and wants and take care of them.

Good boundaries are not defensive walls. Good boundaries assist relationships by making it possible for people to choose their own terms for relationships. Defensive walls discourage relationships by

isolating the self, shutting others out, and blocking communication. Good boundaries also help us to have choice. Rather than just reacting to people and situations we can appropriately respond to them. We can use our boundaries and privacy to evaluate things and decide how we want to handle them. To establish boundaries, a person needs to have a way to know themselves, to have a relationship with themselves. Communication is important in all relationships, especially our relationship with ourselves. In order to communicate with ourselves we need to have privacy and be able to identify our own feelings and thoughts.

Some examples of personal boundaries include our thoughts, feelings, psychic energy, freedom to choose, material possessions, and our body and sexuality. Each person has the right to have their own thoughts and feelings and to have them respected by others. They have a right to make choices about their body and their sexuality. This means they have a right to choose who touches them, where, how and even when. They also have a right to have material possessions which they can keep for themselves and for their own use. Boundaries include the right to choose how much of ourselves and our possessions we are willing, or able to share with others, and how much we wish to keep private or preserve for our own use.

Parents can best teach children about boundaries by having good boundaries themselves and modeling that for their children. Many parents have never learned healthy boundaries for themselves and need to learn to establish them for themselves as well as their children. Being aware of our own thoughts and feelings is the first step towards establishing boundaries. Boundaries should be flexible, allowing us to choose where to draw the line. Healthy boundaries have windows and doors. Windows make it possible for us know what is going on outside of our boundaries. Doors provide a way for us to allow others inside of our boundaries if we choose. Having a healthy attitude towards ourselves and others is also a key ingredient in establishing boundaries. A healthy attitude towards ourselves and others involves caring about and respecting our well being and that of others.

In his article, "Cultivating Healthy Boundaries", Philip St. Romain lists several ideas that are important in having a healthy attitude towards ourselves and others, and helpful in developing boundaries. They are listed on the next page.

1. I make my own decisions about my life.
2. I allow others to do for themselves what is theirs to do, to make their mistakes, and to learn from them.
3. I live according to a set of moral values I have decided to follow.
4. I accept responsibility for solving my own problems.
5. I ask for help with my problems when I cannot solve them by myself.
6. I allow other people to have their own problems, offering my help does not leave the other person free from responsibility.
7. My body and my sexuality belong to me. I share my body and my sexuality according to my own values and when I choose to do so.
8. I claim the fruits of my labor and decide for myself how I will share these with others.
9. I refuse to accept unacceptable behavior from others. When I feel mistreated, I ask the other to stop. If they do not stop, I remove myself from the situation.

Having healthy boundaries also means recognizing that others have the right to establish boundaries for themselves and then respecting those boundaries. Our feelings and thoughts give us information and are often signals to us that our boundaries have been violated or that we have violated another person's boundaries. Boundaries can be violated in many ways. Children's boundaries are commonly violated, often by their parents. Parents often tell children what to think or

how they should feel. Many children do not have their possessions respected. Unfortunately many children are severely damaged by abuse. All forms of abuse violate children's boundaries. Emotional abuse violates their right to have their own feelings and feel good about themselves.

Physical abuse violates the child's body, their choices and their emotions. The most damaging abuse is sexual abuse which violates the child emotionally, physically and spiritually. Adults who were abused as children need to heal their pain from their childhood so that they can be healthy. Parents who were abused as children are at great risk of abusing their own children unless they heal their past. They are also at risk of being abused in their adult relationships or having unsuccessful adult relationships. Because they were damaged as children they have grown up psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually damaged and become caught in a cycle of abuse. They may be abusive to children, especially their own without even being aware of how damaging their words and action are.

Let's look at some of the ways in which parents can respect their children's boundaries and help them to develop a high level of self-esteem. Parents can openly express their love for their children to their children. Children need to be told that they are loved and shown with hugs and appropriate physical attention. Children need to be loved unconditionally by their parents. That means they are loved no matter what they do. Parents need to be sure that they communicate to their children that they love them, although they may disapprove of their behavior.

They can support and encourage their children and accept them as they are. Parents can support their children when they set them up to win rather than wait for or expect them to fail. When children do make mistakes, they need to be encouraged. Children are discouraged when they are lectured, overprotected and humiliated. Encouragement involves emphasizing the positive more than the negative. Tell the child what they need to do to improve rather than stressing what they did wrong. Children also need to hear more praise than criticism.

Point out the good part of what they did. Praise the child for what they did and do not compare them with others, or the accomplishments of others.

Parents can teach children that their feelings are always OK. Parents can share their feelings with their children, and listen to children's feelings and thoughts without overreacting. Consider how your child feels when you are dealing with them and respect their feelings. Don't laugh at, or criticize a child, for the way they feel. Give the child permission to express their feelings. That means allowing the child to cry when they are physically or emotionally hurt. It may also mean allowing an angry child to go someplace to let off steam rather than trying to force them not to be angry. Children also need to be able to express their disappointment about things. They may sigh or moan or even complain a little about being asked to wash the dishes. This is an expression of their feelings, and it is not necessarily disrespectful. Remember to focus on getting them to comply with the request and let go of wanting to control how they feel about it.

Treat children with respect. They deserve to be treated with the same respect we would give to our best friend. Be polite, considerate and courteous with them, they deserve it and it teaches them to treat us in the same way. This includes apologizing to our children when we hurt their feelings or wrong them in some way. When we make a mistake with our children it is not OK to just forget about it because it "may have been" accidental. Parents need to acknowledge their mistakes and express sincere sorrow for the hurt their children felt because of these mistakes. Doing this shows respect for the child and teaches them to acknowledge their own mistakes and to apologize to others.

Recognize that the stress and worries they have each day are serious and important to them. Their relationships with their friends and schoolmates are just as important to them as your relationships with your friends and co-workers. If they have difficulty with a teacher it is just as much a problem for them as problems with your boss are to you. Although their problems may seem small and

insignificant to you, they truly are big and important to them. School is where a child goes about their "work", so honor the importance of their work. Treat children with gentleness and kindness. Rather than blame them when things go wrong, help them to accept responsibility for their mistakes and correct them. Be tolerant of your children and their mistakes, they are still learning. Mistakes are opportunities for learning. Making fun of, pointing out shortcomings and exposing their sensitivities are cruel ways to treat children. They are like finding an emotional bruise or cut on the child, continually poking the bruise or cut, and then complaining that it hasn't healed yet. Assist them in maintaining personal dignity. Let them choose who to share personal things with about themselves. Most parents would agree that they love their children and value their relationship with them. Be sure that your interactions with your children reflect that love and their importance to you. The following anonymously written poem has some very important messages for all parents.

CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH CRITICISM,
HE LEARNS TO CONDEMN**

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH HOSTILITY,
HE LEARNS TO FIGHT.**

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH RIDICULE,
HE LEARNS TO BE SHY.**

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH TOLERANCE,
HE LEARNS TO BE PATIENT.**

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH ENCOURAGEMENT,
HE LEARNS CONFIDENCE.**

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH PRAISE,
HE LEARNS TO APPRECIATE**

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH FAIRNESS,
HE LEARNS JUSTICE.**

IF A CHILD LIVES WITH SECURITY,

HE LEARNS TO HAVE FAITH.

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH APPROVAL,
HE LEARNS TO LIKE HIMSELF.**

**IF A CHILD LIVES WITH ACCEPTANCE AND FRIENDSHIP
HE LEARNS TO FIND LOVE IN THE WORLD.**

Be patient with yourself also, you are learning and growing and increasing your own parenting potential. Apply what you have learned here in dealing with your own inner child. Create a safe place and make time for your own healing. Re-parent yourself. You deserve it.

**STUDY QUESTIONS - STUDY GUIDE FIFTEEN
RAISING PSYCHOLOGICALLY HEALTHY CHILDREN**

1. The way people behave and how they function is tied to their:
 - a) patterns and thoughts
 - b) feelings and emotions
 - c) thoughts and feelings
 - d) parents and patterns
2. One of the most important aspects of good psychological and emotional health is _____.
 - a) good grades
 - b) making money
 - c) high self-protection
 - d) high self-esteem
3. Parents have _____ influence on the self-esteem of their children:
 - a) little
 - b) no
 - c) the only
 - d) critical
4. A parent's absence or lack of active involvement with their child has _____.
 - a) no influence on them
 - b) some minor influence on the parent
 - c) an influence on the child
 - d) all of these
5. When parents are absent, children assume that something is wrong with _____ or else parents would be there for them.
 - a) life
 - b) the parent
 - c) work
 - d) them
6. Parents need to create an atmosphere where children are free to express themselves without having their thoughts and feelings:

- a) at great risk of abusing their own children
 - b) very protective of their own children
 - c) never going to have children of their own
 - d) none of these
23. When parents love their children unconditionally it means:
- a) that parents approve of everything they do
 - b) that parents love them when they behave well
 - c) that parents love them no matter what they do
 - d) none of these
24. Children are _____ when they are lectured, overprotected, and humiliated.
- a) encouraged
 - b) supported
 - c) discouraged
 - d) loved
25. Many times children will sigh or moan or even complain when they are asked to do things and it is an expression of their feelings and it is:
- a) not necessarily disrespectful
 - b) an indication they will not do what is asked
 - c) not ok for children to express their feelings
 - d) a sign of a rebellious child
26. Parents need to remember to focus on getting their children to comply with their requests and _____ control how they feel about it.
- a) also try to
 - b) let go of wanting to
 - c) decide how to
 - d) all of these
27. Children deserve to be treated with the same respect we would give to:
- a) a dog
 - b) our enemy
 - c) anyone who crosses us
 - d) our best friend
28. Parents need to _____ when they hurt their feelings or wrong them in some way.
- a) apologize to children
 - b) teach children to apologize first
 - c) make excuses for their behavior
 - d) ignore it
29. Children's relationships with friends and schoolmates are _____ your relationships with your friends and co-workers.

- a) not as important as
 - b) just as trivial as
 - c) just as important as
 - d) more important than
30. It is important that parents' interactions with their children:
- a) reflect that they love and value their children
 - b) are always serious
 - c) are always lighthearted
 - d) always remind them that the parents are most important